

Do you always

Placing yourself at the top of your to-do list isn't selfish, say psychologists—it's the key to greater happiness, health and harmony!

You pride yourself on being the one everyone turns to for love, support and assistance, dropping everything to buoy, bolster and back people up. But the ugly side of being a hero—exhaustion, frustration, a chronic sense of failure—leaves little energy for taking care of *you*.

“You learn from culture that self-care is selfish and that caring for others is the highest ideal,” says psychotherapist Tracey Cleantis, author of *An Invitation to Self-Care*. “You learn that to be a great mother, daughter, sister, wife and friend is to be tired, worn-down, busy, breathless, sleepless and self-denying.” You feel the toll it's taking, but there's always a fire to put out or a crisis to see someone through. “We tend to say to ourselves: *Once I achieve this, once I accomplish that, then I will take care of me,*” observes Cleantis. “However, if you don't start with self-care, you won't have the fuel to reach the mountaintops that you are capable of reaching.”

The key to prioritizing your own needs alongside everyone else's? Boundaries. “Boundaries are listening to your ‘yes’ and your ‘no’ and understanding what your limits are,” explains Cleantis. For example, you might cap the number of hours you invest in someone else's problem or scale back commitments that sap your energy. “Setting boundaries is truly the greatest self-care you can ever do.”

To get started, identify the emotional red flag you notice most in your own life, then read on for expert advice on how to honor your needs while still being a resource for everyone you love.

Do YOU need this note to self?

Dear Wonder Woman,
I hereby grant you permission to be an ordinary human with needs, boundaries and preferences.

Sincerely,
Burned Out

put you last?

THE SYMPTOM

Anxiety

Months after a friend's divorce, the strain of taking late-night calls and going above and beyond to cheer her up has left you drained. "When your helping is unsustainable, you end up so overburdened that you're unable to do things for yourself, let alone others," says Shawn Meghan Burn, Ph.D., author of *Unhealthy Helping*. "You might *want* to set a boundary, but you feel afraid of being mean and don't want to risk the person's anger or rejection."

THE Rx

Eliminate "I must"

"Challenge the unreasonable belief, *I must be available 24/7 for my friend*," advises Burn. "Say to yourself, *Really? Is that what it means to be a good friend? Aren't there other ways?*" The extreme thought driving your behavior locks you into a sense of impossible obligation, but questioning it creates space to explore other ways of helping, like sending a card reminding her she's loved. Says Burn, "It's not selfish to have appropriate boundaries."

THE SYMPTOM

Resentment

Your mom and sister have roped you into their latest feud, expecting you to play peacemaker—but you're feeling more peeved than peace-loving at the expectation of being their go-between. "When you're doing all the giving, that's an imbalanced relationship," says Burn. "You feel hurt, angry and resentful because they're using you as a messenger for their toxic messages rather than really working out what they need to work out."

THE Rx

Take a step back

"Be honest, direct and firm about what being in the middle is doing to you," says Burn. Say, "I love you both, but this is tearing me apart, so I have to back away." Why it works: "You're making a clear statement that's emotionally honest, and they *do* care about you, so they will usually be respectful of that boundary." It may take some repetition ("I told you how uncomfortable this makes me"), but your plea will help you feel less bitter.

THE SYMPTOM

Burnout

Every year, all the holiday prep falls to you, and in the midst of cooking, cleaning and shopping, you're too drained to get in the spirit. "For me, I *want* to make dinner, I *want* to get the perfect gifts, so it's not just saying no to other people, it's saying no to myself," admits Burn. "You get a 'giver's high' from making people happy, but if you push for too long trying to meet these standards, you become emotionally and physically exhausted."

THE Rx

Give stress the slip

"Write a permission slip, print it out and put in on the fridge to remind yourself you deserve a break," advises Cleantis. Your slip might say, "Dear Wonder Woman, I hereby grant you permission to be an ordinary human with needs, boundaries and preferences. Sincerely, Burned Out." Notes Cleantis, "Self-care and boundaries aren't self-indulgent—they are nonnegotiable to being a healthy, happy and functional adult."

THE SYMPTOM

Guilt

Your neighbor always asks for favors ("Can you feed my cat while I'm away? Lend me your Crock-Pot? Watch my kids?"), and even though you know the help is rarely reciprocated and drains your time, energy and money, you always oblige. "There are certain types of people, 'takers,' who will take and take," observes Burn. "You feel guilty saying no because you want to be nice and it feels mean to say no, especially if being a giving person is a primary source of your self-esteem."

THE Rx

Calculate the cost of pleasing

To fight the urge to acquiesce, ask yourself, *Is her disapproval so unbearable that I must sacrifice myself to reduce the possibility she'll be mad?* You may worry your neighbor will be hurt, but weighing that against the toll of more favors reveals the price you pay to please. "People accept boundaries if they're delivered simply," says Burn. So it works best to plainly say, "No, I can't cat-sit." "Even when people are miffed, they get over it almost always. You can be a good person and still say no; others can handle it."